



12 PREGAME TIPS TO TRUST WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED IN PRACTICE

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12 PREGAME TIPS TO TRUST WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED IN PRACTICE

What should you think about just before a game to ensure you trust what you've learned in practice? How should you prepare yourself? These are important questions. This checklist will help you get ready to play more freely and confidently in competition.

In each game or competition, one of your goals is to perform with confidence, focus and trust. You also want to have fun. Below are some “mental game” strategies—ideas about how you should focus your thoughts and energy before a game or competition. Try to apply two or three of the strategies when you play a game or compete.

1. **Strive for perfection in practice, but accept that you can't be perfect in competition.**

You can certainly strive for perfection - or try to be perfect - during your training and practice sessions. However, one of your goals is to accept that you can't be perfect when you play sports. You are human and will make mistakes. Even the best athletes in the world mess up or goof up from time to time.

Goals: Let go of mistakes quickly. Play to play great today, which means get the job done, even if your game looks and feels imperfect or ugly. We call this “winning ugly.”



Learn from your mistakes instead of beating yourself up or being upset with yourself about your mistakes.

2. Put the “practice mindset” behind you. Don’t keep trying to improve your skills, as if you’re in practice.

You have worked hard in your training and practice up to this point. You’ve attended practices and worked with coaches. You should focus on making the best of what you have learned now. You need to trust in your skills and what you have practiced now. It doesn’t help to continue to work on or master your skills just before a game or competition.

You have to get the job done and “win ugly” if necessary. (Winning ugly means you may not look as graceful as an Olympic skater. You may even trip over your own feet from time to time. But you get the job done.)

Goals: Remember that you’re now performing—not practicing. Get the job done. Win ugly. Just go for it.

3. Mistakes are only mistakes—and you can learn from them.

The best athletes learn from their mistakes instead of losing confidence and getting frustrated. Accept mistakes and move on so you can play on with confidence. Give yourself 2-3 “get-out-of-jail” cards so it’s OK to make two or three mistakes per game. This way, when you do make a mistake, you can let it go and keep playing without feeling frustrated.



Goals: Accept mistakes. Give yourself the freedom of making a couple of mistakes. Let go of mistakes quickly when they happen. Don't keep thinking about them.

4. Get into the “performance mindset.”

Don't keep thinking about your technique—how you stand or shoot for example. Just think about getting the job done. This means stop thinking about how you should stand or shoot or putt. React and be creative. Play freely. Don't question or analyze how you stand or shoot or putt. Just do it!

Goals: Get the job done. Don't worry about how your performance looks or feels.

5. Keep high expectations in check. Don't go into the game or performance thinking you should score or win big.

Before each game, watch out for those thoughts that tell you you've got to score 10 goals or win the game for your team. These are what we call high expectations. Replace these thoughts with what we call process goals. Focus on what's happening at the moment—the next shot, kick, or pass. Don't worry about the score or your statistics.

Goals: Identify and let go of high expectations. Don't be hard on yourself. Have fun.

6. Focus on your “process goals,” instead of the score or win.



Even though we've told you not to focus on technique in games, you can establish mini-goals for the game. These should be simple and fairly easy to achieve. Let's say you want to improve your free-throw shooting. Visualize a good shot while you're warming up. Here are other examples of process goals.

- Golf: Think about selecting a smart target on each shot before you play
- Tennis: Select the placement of your shot on each serve
- Baseball: See the ball quickly when the pitcher releases the ball during your at-bat
- Football: Commit to the play called

Goals: Set one or two process goals before each game. This will help you focus your thoughts on what's happening in the moment—not on the score.

7. Strive for success, not avoiding failure or mistakes.

Focus on what you want to have happen—not on what you're afraid of. Your process goals will help you with this task. Be aware; recognize when your thoughts are all about avoiding mistakes. "Oops, I was worrying about missing that shot," you might tell yourself. When this happens, refocus on what you want to do on the next shot instead. Don't think about what you want to avoid; think about what you want to make happen! (Remember, however, that you shouldn't start telling yourself that you're going to win the game for the team, score 15 goals, etc). Stay in the moment.



Goals: Focus on what you want to happen. Use process goals to help you focus on being positive and thinking about what's happening right now.

8. Perform with a functional mindset. That means Go For It!

When you are in a functional mindset, you're doing whatever it takes to get the job done. You don't worry about how you are playing. You don't try to be perfect. Instead, your only concern is to complete the play, shot, or pass without analyzing how well you are doing.

Goals: Perform efficiently instead of perfectly. Simplify your thoughts and movements. Stick to what you know works for you.

9. Keep your performance or game simple.

Don't over-analyze how you are playing or performing. Don't crowd your mind with too many thoughts or over-analyze. Use whatever is working that day to help you compete.

Goals: Keep it simple. Less is better. Don't over-analyze!

10. Enter the role of the athlete.

Put life's hassles and distractions behind you. You should temporarily forget any distractions in your life (your friends, your schoolwork, your pets, for example.) Commit to being an athlete for the next few hours. Later, you can go back to thinking about other things.



Goals: Forget about things like your schoolwork, your lost dog, or your friend's last phone call right now. Focus on your sports.

11. Give yourself a stamp of approval. You're the best!

Accept yourself. You are a person first and foremost, not JUST an athlete. It does not matter what others think about you. It's important for you to like yourself as a person. Don't worry about what other people think of you. Don't worry about how people judge you. Just focus on your game and your process goals.

Goals: Play only for yourself--not others. Don't worry about what others think of you. Don't make assumptions about what others think of you.

12. Have fun. You don't have to be so serious!

Some athletes think they need to be serious to play or perform their best. The truth is, if you're too serious, you might feel tense playing. You might try too hard. You should enjoy playing sports. Try to feel light and carefree. Have fun with your teammates. Having fun will help you play fearlessly. When you play fearlessly, you're more likely to be creative, free and successful.

Goals: You play sports for fun, the thrill. While it's fun to compete, results are secondary to enjoying the process of competing!



**Please see summary on the following page. You can print this page and take it with your to competition.



Your Pregame Action Plan Summary

- You can try to perfect your skills in practice. But when you're playing a game or competing, tell yourself that you can't be perfect.
- Put the practice mindset behind you. That means don't try to improve your skills. Just go for it.
- Tell yourself it's okay to make mistakes. Learn from mistakes.
- Don't worry about things like how you're standing or shooting (technique). Play freely. Play ugly – win ugly.
- Let go of expectations ("I have to win the game for the team"). Replace these thoughts with process goals.
- Focus on your process goals—not on the score.
- Be positive. Think about being successful. Don't think about avoiding mistakes or failure.
- Do whatever it takes to play well, even if it's ugly or imperfect.
- Keep your thoughts simple. Don't over-analyze.
- Enter the role of the athlete and be a performer.
- Give yourself a stamp of approval. You're the best!
- Have fun! Don't be too serious!



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- Interact and get answers to your questions from other youth coaches in the forum for coaches.
- Listen to cutting-edge sports psychology classes conducted by teleconference with Dr. Cohn or Lisa Cohn for sports parents and coaches.



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